Newsweek
Time
U.S. News & World Report 69
Date 7 Dec. 87

A conversation with David Ignatius, the author of a critically praised new espionage novel set in Beirut, *Agents of Innocence*, which grew out of his experiences as a reporter covering the Middle East and the intelligence community

The spy as a modern Everyman


DARRYL HEIKES—USN&WR

Spy novels have undergone enormous changes since James Bond's day. In the Bond novels, spying meant having incredible sexual adventures, drinking and driving fast cars. It was living out male fantasies. But in the novels of John Le Carré, the life of the spy has turned really bleak. The genre appeals to modern people who live in this very uncertain, evanescent world.

Today, the spy is a kind of existential Everyman. The alienation and cynicism of the intelligence officer and the duplicity and mysteriousness of the world he operates in capture something we all feel. There is a sense that, increasingly, we just don't understand events in the world—the Kennedy assassinations, the war in Vietnam, Watergate—and we wonder if there are conspiracies that explain them. Surely this confusion about core events has something to do with the genre's popularity. We identify with the intelligence agent who is trying to sort out conflicting versions of reality, trying to peel away layers of things to get at the truth.

Following in the path of Graham Greene

I came upon the story that's the backbone of my novel when I covered the Middle East for the *Wall Street Journal.* Before I went there, a Carter administration official mentioned in passing that the CIA's man in the PLO had been killed the previous year. Eventually I found people who were ready to talk about what had occurred. It turned out that during the 1970s, the CIA maintained a relationship with Yassir Arafat's chief of staff, who was a notorious playboy, like a character in the novel. He drove fast cars and bedded lots of women. When I wrote the story for the *Journal,* Arafat was furious. The left wing of the PLO was delighted because they thought it showed that Arafat had ties with the Americans all these years. I found the story fascinating and wanted to write more about it. A novel seemed the best way to proceed.

The book starts with the blowing up of the American Embassy in Lebanon. As a reporter I had gone to the Embassy and interviewed some military officers who were at the absolute high point of their optimism about U.S. involvement in Lebanon. An hour after I left the building, it blew up. That is the clearest image for me of what the American presence in Lebanon came to—a pile of rubble.

My book tries to update the picture Graham Greene drew in *The Quiet American* of American innocence and naïveté and how in trying to do good we make a mess. I even have a character with the same name as someone referred to in Greene's book—York Harding. It was a small way of explicitly saying: "This is meant to follow in Graham Greene's footsteps."

There's another way I wanted my book to be like Greene's. It's presumptuous to make the comparison, but the pleasure of reading a novel by Greene is not plot—it's characterization. What makes you turn the pages compulsively is that you're so interested in his people. One of the nice reactions I have got is that readers relate to my main character, a CIA officer. He's a decent guy who loves his wife and feels terrible when he thinks about being unfaithful to her. Normal, ordinary problems of life are what he's all about.

I wanted the novel to treat CIA officers like people we see every day. Most spy novels are about counterespionage—a chess game against the diabolical Soviets—or we have novels about farfetched paramilitary operations. What we generally don't have are intelligence-collection novels—what it's like to recruit an agent and run him, which presumably is what intelligence officers mostly do.

The world of the intelligence officer is more mundane than usually painted. It has rhythms and dilemmas that are as powerful as what people read in novels. Yet the pace is slower. Former officers tell me that what they do is a lot like what journalists do. Outsiders think being a reporter is an exciting, romantic business. But an awful lot of the work involves waiting for things to happen. It's standing in a corridor outside some crummy hotel room waiting for labor negotiators to come out and, maybe, talk for two minutes. Intelligence officers spend an awful lot of time in a similar way—waiting for a meeting with an agent, waiting to nail somebody they're trying to blackmail, waiting for the opportunity to plant a microphone.

Details from real life

I covered the intelligence community in the late '70s when all of a sudden a world that had been closed to us opened, in part due to congressional investigations. It's amazing how many of the details in my novel come right out of the nonfiction of that era. For example, I was curious about the paper work that an intelligence officer goes through when trying to recruit somebody as an agent. It's the kind of question a CIA source probably wouldn't answer. But, lo and behold, there it was in incredible detail in Philip Agee's book *Inside the Company.*

In the end, I didn't want to write a book in which the pieces fit together as neatly as they do in a lot of thrillers. If somebody were to ask me: "What's the difference between a detective story and a spy novel?" I would say that a detective story involves a neat solution—and it all makes sense. But a spy novel, like real life, ought to end with some measure of ambiguity.

Conversation with Alvin P. Sanoff

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